

excerpts from
'Peace is Every Step'

by Thich Nhat Hanh



"Peace is present right here and now, in ourselves and in everything we do and see."

Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours

Every morning, when we wake up, we have twenty-four brand-new hours to live. What a precious gift! We have the capacity to live in a way that these twenty-four hours will bring peace, joy, and happiness to ourselves and others.

Peace is present right here and now, in ourselves and in everything we do and see. The question is whether or not we are in touch with it. We don't have to travel far away to enjoy the blue sky. We don't have to leave our city or even our neighborhood to enjoy the eyes of a beautiful child. Even the air we breathe can be a source of joy.

We can smile, breathe, walk, and eat our meals in a way that allows us to be in touch with the abundance of happiness that is available. We are very good at preparing to live, but not very good at living. We know how to sacrifice ten years for a diploma, and we are willing to work very hard to get a job, a car, a house, and so on. But we have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment, the only moment there is for us to be alive. Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy, and serenity. We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment.

This small book is offered as a bell of mindfulness, a reminder that happiness is possible only in the present moment. Of course, planning for the future is a part of life. But even planning can only take place in the present moment. This book is an invitation to come back to the present moment and find peace and joy. I offer some of my experiences and a number of techniques that may be of help. But please do not wait until finishing this book to find peace. Peace and happiness are available in every moment. Peace is every step. We shall walk hand in hand. Bon voyage.

The Dandelion Has My Smile

If a child smiles, if an adult smiles, that is very important. If in our daily lives we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. If we really know how to live, what better way to start the day than with a smile? Our smile affirms our awareness and determination to live in peace and joy. The source of a true smile is an awakened mind.

How can you remember to smile when you wake up? You might hang a reminder--such as a branch, a leaf, a painting, or some inspiring words--in your window or from the ceiling above your bed, so that you notice it when you wake up. Once you develop the practice of smiling, you may not need a reminder. You will smile as soon as you hear a bird singing or see the sunlight streaming through the window. Smiling helps you approach the day with gentleness and understanding.

When I see someone smile, I know immediately that he or she is dwelling in awareness. This half-smile, how many artists have labored to bring it to the lips of countless statues and paintings? I am sure the same smile must have been on the faces of the sculptors and painters as they worked. Can you imagine an angry painter giving birth to such a smile? Mona Lisa's smile is light, just a hint of a smile. Yet even a smile like that is enough to relax all the muscles in our face, to banish all worries and fatigue. A tiny bud of a smile on our lips nourishes awareness and calms us miraculously. It returns to us the peace we thought we had lost.

Our smile will bring happiness to us and to those around us. Even if we spend a lot of money on gifts for everyone in our family, nothing we buy could give them as much happiness as the gift of our awareness, our smile. And this precious gift costs nothing. At the end of a retreat in California, a friend wrote this poem:

I have lost my smile,

but don't worry.
The dandelion has it.

If you have lost your smile and yet are still capable of seeing that a dandelion is keeping it for you, the situation is not too bad. You still have enough mindfulness to see that the smile is there.

You only need to breathe consciously one or two times and you will recover your smile. The dandelion is one member of your community of friends. It is there, quite faithful, keeping your smile for you.

In fact, everything around you is keeping your smile for you. You don't need to feel isolated. You only have to open yourself to the support that is all around you, and in you. Like the friend who saw that her smile was being kept by the dandelion, you can breathe in awareness, and your smile will return.

Conscious Breathing

There are a number of breathing techniques you can use to make life vivid and more enjoyable. The first exercise is very simple. As you breathe in, you say to yourself, "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." And as you breathe out, say, "Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out." Just that. You recognize your in-breath as an in-breath and your out-breath as an out-breath. You don't even need to recite the whole sentence; you can use just two words: "In" and "Out." This technique can help you keep your mind on your breath. As you practice, your breath will become peaceful and gentle, and your mind and body will also become peaceful and gentle. This is not a difficult exercise. In just a few minutes you can realize the fruit of meditation.

Breathing in and out is very important, and it is enjoyable. Our breathing is the link between our body and our mind. Sometimes our mind is thinking of one thing and our body is doing another, and mind and body are not unified. By concentrating on our breathing, "In" and "Out," we bring body and mind back together, and become whole again. Conscious breathing is an important bridge.

To me, breathing is a joy that I cannot miss. Every day, I practice conscious breathing, and in my small meditation room, I have calligraphed this sentence: "Breathe, you are alive!" Just breathing and smiling can make us very happy, because when we breathe consciously we recover ourselves completely and encounter life in the present moment.

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